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Shopdropping

Materialities, Mobilities, Creative Interventions

by Mara Mürlebach

abstract

This article brings together a feminist sloth, a cultural activist practice and a Human Geography student. That student, the author of this article, shopdropped a sloth sticker to protest the discriminatory body politics of diet magazines. Through a practice-based and autoethnographic approach, she tries to make sense of her own experience and of shopdropping as an activist practice. Drawing on the geographical concepts of place and movement, shopdropping is situated within the debates around subversive material cultures and creative interventions into places of consumption. Shopdroppers' disobedient things lend themselves to thinking through the connections between geography, art, and activism and for contemplating the effects of creative engagements with cultures of consumption.

Keywords

shopdropping; material geographies; subversive material culture; disobedient things; consumption cultures

1 Introduction: Shop til you drop?

How to shopdrop in ten steps… Yes, that sounds helpful, I think. I've been sitting in front of the computer for quite a while, searching the internet for references on shopdropping. I wildly click through the websites until… Wait a minute, this is funny! Two people shopdropped themselves, wearing huge costumes made of work gloves. They pretend to be a pile of gloves in a hardware shop – oh my God, THIS IS HILARIOUS!!!

Fig. 1 *How to shopdrop yourself looking like a pile of work gloves (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjLC6JviZtE; accessed 27/02/18).*

When I clicked on the video of two people looking like a heap of gloves—well, that just made my day (see Fig. 1). In a very funny way, it brought home the value of engaging experimentally with the worlds of shopping that surround us. These creative interventions are what this article is about. It is about shopdropping.

Creative interventions into consumption cultures

Shopdroppers practise a kind of reverse shoplifting in that they „covertly" place „objects on display in a store" (Watkins-Hughes 2004). The practice has been documented in blog posts, in videos, on websites (cf. Buettemeyer 2007; Konsumpf 2010; TheYesLab 2011; SHIFT! 2012; Cook et al. 2013; Cantrell 2015; TEDx Talks 2015) and in two recently published book chapters (cf. Blas 2013; Cook et al. 2017). Objects as diverse as fruit, shampoo bottles, electronics and, as seen above, work gloves are being shopdropped. As a tactic used „for public art, to promote political views or advertise your services" (Buettemeyer 2007), shopdropping is done by consumer-activists, factory workers and artists alike. There are numerous examples of messages being smuggled out of factories and warehouses—secretly hidden, for example, in the pockets of jeans (cf. Cook et al. 2013). Shopdroppers are looking to confront consumers with conditions of production, thus lifting the veil of global market relations (cf. Harvey 1990). Many of them find creative ways in which to work through rather than about things, altering the very materiality of the things their protest targets. Shopdropping has been celebrated as an artistic intervention that has the potential to make people reflect on the things they buy (cf. TEDx Talks 2015). It does so in a non-didactic and dialogical

way that refrains from communicating educational and condescending messages to consumers (cf. Verson 2007).

A cultural geography of shopdropping

I find shopdropping a rich practice to work with, both as an activist and as a researcher in human geography. It foregrounds a couple of topics that are currently debated within the social sciences in general and cultural geography in particular. Shopdropping becomes my object of inquiry as well as the vehicle through which I learn and think. My arguments revolve around my own experience of shopdropping a feminist sloth sticker on a diet magazine in a supermarket. I open the discussion by briefly situating shopdropping within the literature around material cultures, disobedient objects and cultural activism. I, then, go on to recount how I came to research my own shopdrop, thus highlighting the value of practice-based and autoethnographic approaches. Next, I introduce three ideas that came out of my creative intervention. First, I argue that a focus on place makes it possible to understand shopdropping as a highly contextualised and ethnographic practice that has the power to subvert the place of the supermarket. Second, I hold that a movement-centred approach draws out the fact that shopdropping is a practice that travels online and offline. Third, I contemplate the question of whether shopdropping can effect positive change, thereby thinking through the connections of geography, art and activism. To conclude, I offer a critical commentary on shopdropping's geographical imaginaries and the forgotten places it produces.

2 Geography, materiality, culture

In recent years, geography has seen an increasing number of articles and book chapters published on unruly, disobedient, active and acting things. Shopdropping taps into this growing interest in material geographies (cf. Jackson 2000; Anderson and Tolia-Kelly 2004; Anderson and Wylie 2009; Cook and Tolia-Kelly 2010; Crang 2013).

Material cultures and disobedient objects

Cultural geographers have (re-)discovered a strong interest in the materiality of the world and in the "stuff" that our lives, natures and cultures are made of (Crang 2013: 276). Scholars of material cultures set out to rethink the relations between people, places and things. They wish to think with rather than about things (cf. Turkle 2007; Cook and Woodyer 2012). Sherry Turkle (2007), in collecting autobiographical stories of people and their things, shows how objects shape people's lives beyond their intentions or conscious

knowledge. Ian Cook and Tara Woodyer (2012) stress the importance of things in imagining what the world is like; they hold that it is through things that people imagine the world and its geographies. These and other accounts of material culture seek to rethink the nature of materiality. Geographers have drawn on new materialist theorists Jane Bennett (2010) and Donna Haraway (2016), among others, to grapple with this issue. Theorisations of thingness as „unmediated, static physicality" (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly 2004: 670) are being dismissed as outdated. Things are no longer inert, passive, acted upon, stable or discrete. New materialist scholars and geographers have come to understand things as lively, active, acting, and vibrant (cf. Bennett 2010). One strand of material geographical research that appreciates the liveliness of things is the body of work on subversive material cultures. Disobedient things are receiving growing attention in accounts of political movements (cf. Bartlett 2016; Yara and Karakayali 2017) and commodity chain activism (cf. Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012; Cook et al. 2013). London's V&A Museum held an exhibition on Disobedient Objects in 2014/15, showcasing pieces from a diverse range of social and political movements (cf. Flood and Grindon 2014). This is where shopdropping and shopdropped things come into play. The literature on subversive material cultures allows to conceptualise shopdropping as a contentious political practice that materialises dissent through the very objects it contests.

Geography, art and activism

My thoughts on shopdropping are largely influenced by recent conversations in geography, art and activism. There is a growing body of literature on artistic and creative geographies (cf. Madge 2014; Hawkins 2015) and on the political value of creative geographical interventions (cf. Marston and De Leeuw 2013; De Leeuw and Hawkins 2017). These literature is closely associated with accounts of making and crafting (cf. Gauntlett 2011; Carr and Gibson 2016). What I would like to draw out here is that arts and crafts have not only been of interest as an object of inquiry but also as a means of doing research. Geographers have taken to use creative practices as research methods. At the centre of these encounters is the insight that valuable ideas can come out of ‚just doing' something. Doings and makings have a value in themselves that is often overlooked in a focus on output (cf. Hawkins 2015: 263). Practice-based research generates „knowledge from within particular practices and experiences" (Banfield 2016: 463) and, therefore, requires a certain openness to the process of research (cf. Foster and Lorimer 2007: 426). What has inspired me in particular is that geographers have drawn on practice-based methods to think about geographical and other concepts (cf. Hawkins 2011: 473). This is

what I am aspiring to do here. Through shopdropping, I wish to think about the cultural geographies of this practice. In the next section, I expand on how I think a practice-based and autoethnographic approach helps me to do that.

3 Practice-based and autoethnographical research

Why did I decide to do shopdropping myself? I could have provided an analysis of shopdrops as documented by other activists. There are loads of them online. But I opted to do it by myself instead. There are two reasons for this decision: First, I see a strong value in autoethnographic and practice-based approaches and their focus on openness and process. The second reason is that I badly wanted to get away from my computer. At the time of writing this text, I was doing my master's and was spending around 90 percent of my working time at my desk. I was dying to get ‚out there' and ‚do something'.

Here is what I did…

I started to research shopdropping on the internet and quickly found inspiring, hilarious, bewildering, and absurd examples (remember the work gloves in Fig. 1). I began to think about what kind of shopdrop I wanted to do by myself. I quickly settled on doing a feminist drop as I am constantly angered by how women, their bodies and sexualities are being represented in adverts and on packaging of consumer goods. So what did I do? I did not do an elaborate artwork. To be honest, I simply photocopied a feminist sloth sticker my sister Mona had given to me last Christmas. It was cute. And it had a radical message: „Riots not Diets" (see Fig. 2). I, then, ventured off, sticker concealed in my pocket, to do the drop in a supermarket in my neighbourhood. But I will get to that more detailed later. I used a field diary and a digital camera to document and reflect on my practice. Photos, screenshots and short vignettes of my experience are weaved into this text. Autoethnography played an important role in theorising what I was doing. As a methodological tool, it strings together auto (the self), ethno (culture) and graphy (research and writing) (cf. Chang 2008: 48). Its analysis is based on carefully documenting and reflecting on one's own experiences. However, autoethnography is more than mere self-narrative or academic navel-gazing. Through narration, it places the self in a broader cultural context and aims at understanding how personal experiences relate to wider contexts (cf. Butz 2010: 138, 141). Geographers have explored a range of topics through autoethnographic engagements such as landscape (cf. Wylie 2005), harassment (cf. Valentine 1998) and archiving (cf. DeLyser 2015). With the following analysis, I wish to contribute to these accounts. Shopdropping the sloth

sticker made me reflect on the ways in which this practice manages to politicise places of consumption, on how it is situated in wider activist networks and on how it manages to make change.

4 Things out of place

Shopdropping plays with things in places. It engages people, customers, consumers. Catching them off guard, making them wonder. I argue that an approach orientated towards the concept of place is insightful in two ways: First, shopdropping is a place-based and ethnographic practice that engages thoroughly with the materiality of a certain context. Second, it jams commodity culture by revealing the politics at work within places of shopping.

An ethnographic practice

Alright, I'm doing it! I'm in the supermarket. Really excited! I've come to shopdrop something I made. Well, not exactly made. I've photocopied the feminist sloth Mona gave to me for Christmas. I sneak through the aisles. Okay, quick! I grab one of the diet magazines from the stand, quickly take out the sticker from my coat pocket and stick it on top. I put the magazine back on the stand – done! Wow! Now, let's get out of here…

Fig. 2 *Before and after – Shopdropping a feminist sloth sticker on a diet magazine in a supermarket (author's own photograph).*

I did it. I shopdropped a feminist sloth sticker (see Fig. 2). I am now officially among the group of „guerrilla counter-consumerists" (SHIFT! 2012). And it feels good! It took me a couple of days to figure out where and how to do the drop. You cannot just shopdrop anything anywhere. It takes time to prepare. I needed to think about the product I wanted to target and the message I was hoping to get across. I was sitting at my desk at home, thinking hard, when my eyes caught the sloth sticker on my shelf. I had glued it there when I moved in. The sloth was a feminist one,

carrying the message „Riots not Diets“. That‘s it, I thought. Riots not Diets! Just the week before, I had gotten extremely cross with the fact that the supermarket in my neighbourhood sold a whole range of women‘s slimming and fitness magazines. This was the moment to act. Together with the feminist sloth, I would finally show everyone what I thought about these despicable magazines…

What I did on that day was to plan my shopdrop. I was thinking in detail about which product I was going to work with and where to work with it. This is why shopdropping has been called a highly contextualised and „ethnographic“ (SHIFT! 2012) practice: It means that activists engage in depth with the places and things that their drop involves. Shopdroppers work through things. They express criticism of material culture through material culture. In the case of my feminist sloth sticker, I was prompted by problematic mass media body politics. I could have written a letter of complaint to the editors of the diet magazine. However, I decided to express my criticism through the very object I despise. The magazine itself became my vehicle of protest; it became materialised dissent (cf. Taws 2014).

Materialising dissent, politicising places

Shopdroppers tailor their action to the site of the drop. However, for people who find these objects, they can seem strangely out of place. I have no idea what happened after I dropped the feminist sloth. I like to think that someone took the magazine from the stand, looked at it, wondered what was ‚wrong‘ with it and then, maybe, just maybe, thought about its message. Small acts of twisting popular mass culture like shopdropping have become known as “culture jamming” (Watkins-Hughes 2004). They take culture not to be a totalising force but as a site of contention; something that may be subverted and appropriated (cf. Friesinger et al. 2010: 9). The great thing about shopdropping and culture jamming is that it works in places of consumption. The supermarket with its slimming magazines represented to me a place in which misogynistic body politics were being promoted. Through my shopdrop, however, it became a place where these body politics could be contested. Shopdropping allows to reveal the politics at work within places of consumption that would otherwise remain largely invisible.

5 Moving things, moving practices

Shopdropping is a highly contextualised and ethnographic practice that has the potential to subvert commodity cultures. The next section approaches shopdropping from a different geographical angle: namely as a practice in motion. It highlights the mobility of shopdropped things and of the practice of shopdropping itself.

Shopdropping goes travelling

The journeys of things have been discussed at length in geography, among others in the growing field of follow-the-thing research (cf. Cook et al. 2004; Cook and Harrison 2007; Gregson et al. 2010). However, commodities are not the only things that travel. Shopdropped things do, too. In my case, I got a sloth sticker for Christmas in Germany. I took it to Exeter, where I did my master's, and stuck it on the wall of my room. A couple of months later, I photocopied the very same sticker and dropped it onto a magazine. A movement perspective can provide us with a deeper engagement of where objects come from, where they go to and which relations they form underway (Cook and Woodyer 2012: 227).

Shopdropped things travel and so does the practice of shopdropping. Activists share ideas on websites and blogs (see www.instructables.org; www.detructables.org and an example of their work in Fig. 3) as well as with friends and fellow shopdroppers. They make the practice travel across online and offline worlds. I, for example, browsed the internet to get ideas before I dropped the sloth. There are tons of funny and exciting objects people have shopdropped. One of the things I found was the work of the Craftivist Collective who secretly slip messages into the pockets of trousers and skirts in clothing stores (see https://craftivist-collective.com and an example of their work in Fig. 4). This and other examples inspired me to think about what I wanted my own shopdrop to be like. I was becoming so enthusiastic that told my friends over coffee what I was thinking of doing. They, in turn, told me about hilarious shopdropping examples they had come across with which I, again, looked up online. This illustrates how the practice of shopdropping travels widely, online and offline, from internet user to internet user, friend to friend, activist to activist.

Fig. 3 *A Mickey Mouse sign shopdropped in a Disney store (http://www.instructables.com/id/How-To-Shop-Drop/; accessed 27/02/18).*

6 Does it work?

Did the sloth sticker change anything? I like to think that it did. It is a tricky question whether shopdropping actually works. In this last section, I tend to two points: First, I briefly draw out the supposed culture/politics dichotomy inherent in critiques

of cultural activism. Second, I comment on the ongoing debates on the value of creative interventions and discuss how I feel shopdropping manages to make a change—one sloth sticker at a time.

Can culture be political?

There are a number of things I have heard people say about cultural activism over the years. One recurring criticism is that it could not be political—it is said to be, after all, an intervention into culture and not into politics. This critique is echoed in the representation of cultural activism as soft, low-key and easy. The Craftivist Collective, for example, advocates for the „art of gentle protest" (Craftivist Collective 2017). It often seems that cultural activism is perceived as opposed to supposedly radical or proper activism. What speaks from this idea is that, first, acts of protest are being categorised into either cultural or political actions and that, second, these categories are attributed with a supposed level of radicalness and effect. I think that the labelling and hierarchizing of contentious practices is deeply problematic. It supposes that there is one right way to make a change. This view has been challenged by Jennifer Verson who writes for the activist group The Trapese Collective. She argues that we should embrace the idea of a „full spectrum resistance"; after all, „who can really know what it is that really inspires an individual to care, or to turn away, to give up or to rise up?" (Verson 2007: 171) Verson plays to the fact that it is difficult to measure how activism works and what it does.

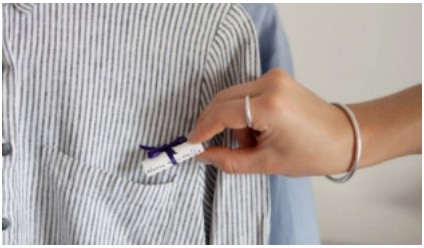

Fig. 2 *Mini Fashion Statements by the Craftivist Collective (https://craftivist-collective.com/Projects/Mini-Fashion-Statements; accessed 01/03/18).*

The æffects of shopdropping

Shopdropping might have been called low-key, easy, gentle and funny. Fine. It often is low-key, easy, gentle and funny. But that does not mean that it cannot be radical or make a change. With shopdropping, consumer activists have developed a unique way to draw attention to the fact that commodity culture is always already political and that it can be acted upon (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012: 4–5). Louise Ashcroft, a London-based artist and passionate shopdropper, tells us that her actions are geared towards making shoppers feel

„powerless“ and „liberated“ at the same time (We make money not art, 2017): Powerless in the face of mass culture's hegemony and liberated by the insight that commodity culture can nevertheless be subverted. Ashcroft's thoughts point to a broader debate around the effects of activist art. Stephen Duncombe (2016) has offered the concept of æffect as an intriguing way to think about the myriad ways in which activist art works. According to him, „before we act in the world, we must be moved to act“ (Duncombe 2016: 119). Activist art generates both effects, which are discernible changes, and affects, which are changes of mind or emotional setting (Duncombe 2016: 118–119). Æffect comes in different shapes, for example in building communities (of shopdroppers all over the world) or in altering perception (of diet magazines) (Duncombe 2016: 120–125). I do not know for sure that anyone saw or was moved by my sloth sticker. What I know, however, is that it made a difference for me. Preparing, doing, thinking through and writing about the shopdrop made me realise how powerful small acts of twisting consumption culture can be. It made me hopeful that we do not need to accept things as they are—such as the horrific body politics of diet magazines—but that we can engage with and change them.

7 Conclusion: Forgotten places

Shopdropping as a cultural and creative practice materialises protest at the very heart of commercial material culture. Thinking through its materialities and politics, a cultural geography perspective offers three intriguing insights. I highlighted, first, that shopdropping is an ethnographic and subversive practice, second, that it is a practice on the move and, third, that it has the power to produce æffect. In the few remaining lines I point out the geographical imaginaries and blind spots within shopdropping.

Which things cannot be shopdropped?

Objects dropped in stores have the power to make customers wonder and think. Messages shopdropped by factory workers make visible that products are made somewhere by someone. In this regard, shopdropping can be effective in, at least partly, lifting the veil that obscures how, by whom and under which conditions the products we buy are made (cf. Harvey 1990). This is important. But doing shopdropping myself made me think about another question: Which products can be dropped? Which cannot? In most, if not all, cases, shopdropping works with manufactured goods. I have come across examples of messages dropped into/with clothes, shoes, handbags, mobile phones, advent calendars, tins, and

shampoo bottles. I have not come across, for example, shopdropped cocoa beans, bananas or pineapples—or any other agricultural produce. I have the feeling that this generates an uncomfortable silence on agricultural products and the no less scandalous working conditions on farms. I am interested in how these forgotten places could be tended to through shopdropping or whether we need other activist practices to make them visible.

Geographical imaginaries

My second point concerns the geographical imaginaries at play within shopdropping. If we take seriously that geographies are imagined through things, then I wonder which geographies are imagined through shopdropped items. I would argue that we imagine a linear value chain that directly connects producers and consumers. How else would someone find a secret letter in the pocket of their jeans? It must have travelled more-or-less straight from the factory to the customer. I think that this geographical imaginary can become problematic. It comes quite close to the managerialist perspective of supply chain management that imagines commodities as following linear, monitored trajectories. What really happens, however, is that things frequently get lost, travel elsewhere or cannot be found anymore (cf. Hulme 2017). Re-thinking the spatial imaginaries at play in shopdropping is an interesting way forward in this discussion.

Until then, I would like to close with a quote for all practising and aspiring shopdroppers: „Culture jamming is useless fun. That's exactly why you should do it." (Verson 2007: 178)

ZUR AUTORIN

Mara Mürlebach fragt sich, seitdem sie alleine einkaufen geht, woher Konsumgüter kommen und wer sie unter welchen Bedingungen herstellt. Zurzeit studiert sie im Master Critical Human Geographies an der University of Exeter (UK). Aus feministischer Perspektive forscht sie zu globalen Wertschöpfungsketten, Konsumkulturen und aktivistischen Praktiken. Außerdem möchte sie mehr über kreative und kollaborative Forschungsansätze erfahren. Das feministische Faultier aus diesem Artikel wohnt weiterhin auf dem Regal über ihrem Schreibtisch.

Der Beitrag wurde von **Clément Dréano** und **Markus Kohlmeier** gereviewed und von beiden redaktionell betreut. **Tatiana Huppertz**, **Tanja Strukelj** und **Andreas Schulz** haben den Artikel lektoriert.

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